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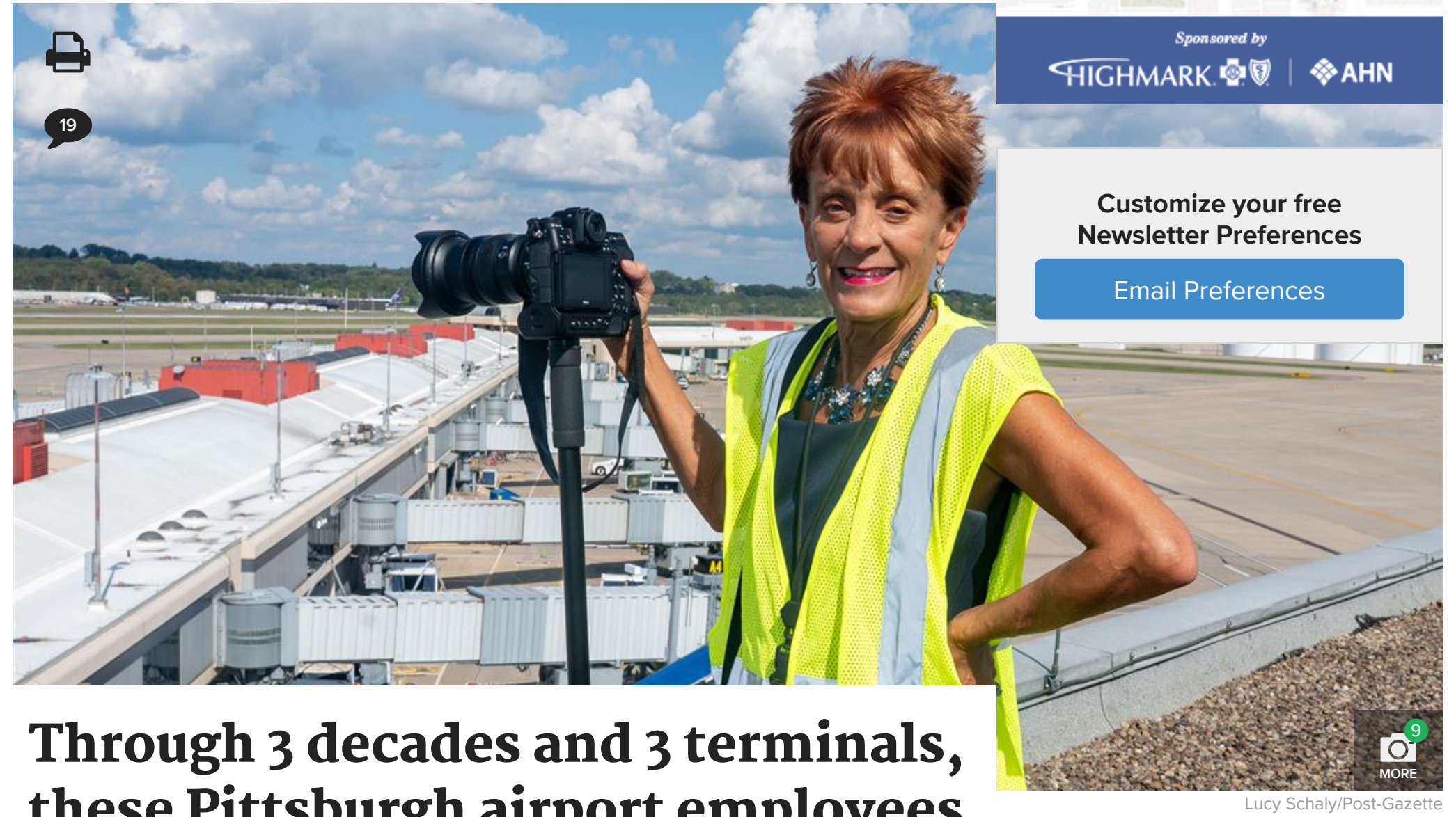
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Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette

Through 3 decades and 3 terminals, these Pittsburgh airport employees have seen it all

From being a USAir hub to the crash of Flight 427, 9/11 and COVID, the airport has endured through massive changes

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OCT 18, 2025 4:00 AM

On Sept. 24, 2009, Beth Hollerich captured history through the lens of her camera from a bird's-eye view as dozens of the world's most powerful people crossed the tarmac at Pittsburgh International Airport.

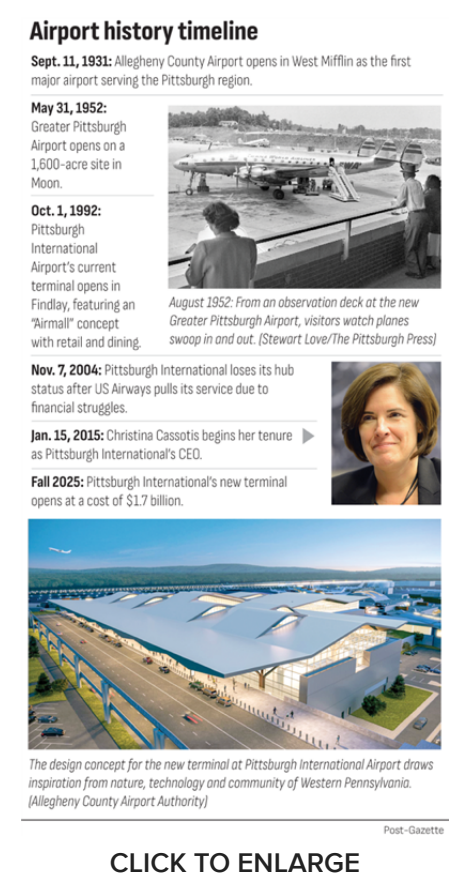
Ms. Hollerich, Pittsburgh International's lone full-time photographer, had received rare access to the top of the airport control tower to take pictures of global leaders arriving for the G20 Summit, an annual high-stakes forum on the world economy.

One by one, Ms. Hollerich picked out planes that were a rare sight at the airport — including Air China, carrying President Hu Jintao, and Air Force One and Two, carrying then-President Barack Obama and his vice president, Joe Biden.

"It was very exciting to see that many different carriers from all over the world here at one time," Ms. Hollerich said.

Adam Babetski
Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal comes with plenty of artistic flair

"Definitely something you don't forget."


Airport history timeline

Sept. 11, 1931: Allegheny County Airport opens in West Mifflin as the first major airport serving the Pittsburgh region.

May 31, 1952: Greater Pittsburgh Airport opens on a 1,600-acre site in Moon.

Oct. 1, 1992: Pittsburgh International Airport's current terminal opens in Findlay, featuring an "Airmall" concept with retail and dining.

August 1952: From an observation deck at the new Greater Pittsburgh Airport, visitors watch planes swoop in and out. (Stewart Love/The Pittsburgh Press)

Nov. 7, 2004: Pittsburgh International loses its hub status after US Airways pulls its service due to financial struggles.

Jan. 15, 2015: Christina Cassotis begins her tenure as Pittsburgh International's CEO.

Fall 2025: Pittsburgh International's new terminal opens at a cost of $1.7 billion.

The design concept for the new terminal at Pittsburgh International Airport draws inspiration from nature, technology and community of Western Pennsylvania. (Allegheny County Airport Authority)

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Ms. Hollerich, 63, is one of a handful of airport employees who will soon have worked in all three of Pittsburgh International's terminals: Greater Pittsburgh Airport in Moon, which opened in 1952, the current terminal, opened in 1992, and the new terminal, which officials say will open this fall.

'It was very surreal'

Airports exist in a perpetually high-stakes environment, where even minor missteps or miscalculations can have catastrophic results. And like employees at airports around the globe, Ms. Hollerich and others have experienced the turbulent times firsthand.

On Sept. 8, 1994, USAir Flight 427, bound for Pittsburgh International, crashed near Aliquippa following a mechanical failure, killing all 127 passengers and five crew members on board.

The airline had an office near Ms. Hollerich's. She recalled seeing employees crying as they watched live coverage on TV.

Field maintenance storeroom supervisor Kurt Parent, 62, could hear the sirens from emergency vehicles heading to the crash site passing his home in Kennedy.

"It was very quiet and somber coming into the airport the next day," he said. "For the most part, work was business as usual. But thoughts of the crash weighed on everyone for some time."

Adam Babetski
Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal is 94% complete, CEO says

Then there was 9/11.

Ms. Hollerich was watching the "Today" show coverage on a wall-mounted TV in her office, initially believing that a plane had accidentally crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center — until a second plane struck the South Tower.

Pittsburgh International was evacuated, Mr. Parent recalled, because there was an unresponsive plane in the area — United Airlines Flight 93 — which crashed in Somerset County after passengers rushed the cockpit and overwhelmed the hijackers.

Mr. Parent recalled keeping a close eye on the sky above him as he drove away from the airport; Ms. Hollerich made a beeline to Chartiers Valley High School to pick up her daughter.

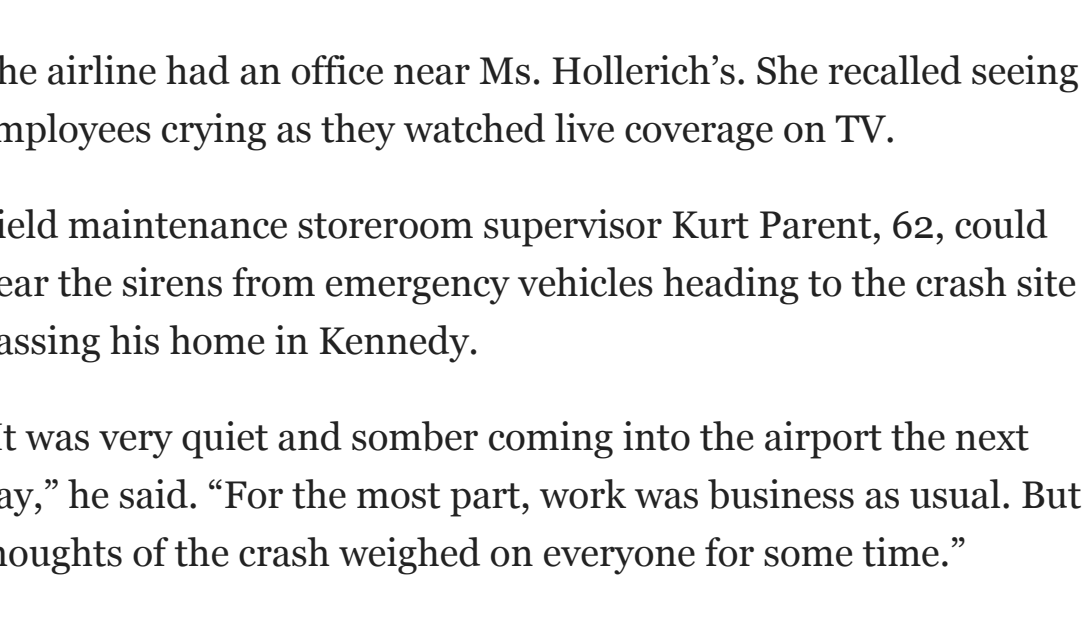
Days later, Mr. Parent returned to the airport to find armed guards on patrol and very few passengers.

"We were walking around a ghost town," Ms. Hollerich said. "It was very surreal."

More challenges came in 2004, when the airport lost its status as a "hub," or a facilitator for connecting flights, and US Airways pulled out, leading to a large drop in passenger and airplane traffic.

Robert Kreeck, 59, a driver in field maintenance for the airport since 1988, said that several members of his team were laid off that year and wouldn't be rehired for eight months. That winter, he and the remaining skeleton crew still had to clear runways when it snowed.

"Whether there's one plane or 600, the runways have to stay open at all times," he said.



Pittsburgh International Airport employee Beth Hollerich on the tarmac on Friday, Sept. 26, 2025.
(Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette)

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted airports everywhere.

For a period of about seven months in 2020, airport employees had to alternate between two weeks of working at home and two weeks of working in-person while wearing masks and socially distancing, Mr. Parent recalled.

Few flights came or went, and Pittsburgh International housed more than 100 grounded planes that airlines no longer needed.

Ms. Hollerich was one of the few people who got to visit the airfield during the pandemic, which she called "the lost two years." She arrived with an escort of firemen because she did not have clearance to drive on the airfield. They took her up in a ladder truck to get pictures.

"Photographing all the aircraft parked on the airfield was one of my bucket-list moments," she said. "I have never seen that many aircraft parked at one time.

"I hope not to ever see it again."

'You slept when you could'

Mr. Parent started working at the airport in October 1988, initially as a staff accountant in the finance department, where he handled the airport's grants and other large transactions.

He processed federal grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, state grants through the Pennsylvania Department of Aviation, and, later, American Rescue and Recovery Act grants during the Obama administration.

Mr. Parent made the leap to field maintenance in 2021, and today he oversees the building's two-story 1,500-square-foot storeroom filled with automobile tires, air filters and hydraulic fittings, as well as three bays in the garage across the street that house 55-gallon drums of oil, windshield washer fluids and bags of concrete to fill potholes.

It's not a particularly large operation for a facility the airport's size, he said, but inventory rarely lingers; the company the airport works with usually has same-day delivery.

In March 1994, a blizzard slammed Western Pennsylvania, dropping nearly 2 feet of snow and putting pressure on the airport, which had to stay open.

Mr. Kreeck, of field maintenance, and his colleagues raced to the runways to prevent the snow from building up using a technique he calls the "Conga Line," where the snowplows, brooms and blowers work in tandem to push snow out of the way, stopping only to refuel.

He and his team worked for more than two days straight to ensure that planes could safely take off and land.

"You slept when you could," he said.

Today, Mr. Kreeck's operation is more manageable, thanks to the MB5 and Mauler, two brands of vehicles the airport uses that combine snow plows, brooms and blowers into one machine.

"The technology has just took off from where we were," Mr. Kreeck said. "It's just night and day."

During his progression over the years to a supervising role overseeing 18 drivers, Mr. Kreeck has come to value other long-tenured Teamsters, laborers and mechanics he works with daily, not only as colleagues, but in social settings.

"We're like one big family," he said.

A workplace — and workforce — evolves

Ms. Hollerich started as a source clerk in the airport's purchasing department in 1989. She recalled spending her days typing up purchase orders for whatever the airport needed, down to rolls of toilet paper — a job that was "not exciting, but definitely necessary."

"We had real typewriters back then, and I'm a terrible typist," she said.

She found herself using plenty of Wite-Out. "Definitely not my dream job."

Eventually, Ms. Hollerich found her calling when she transferred to communications, and a director promoted her to an administrative position. That gave her a platform to pursue her growing interest in photography.

"I used to take photos on my little Instamatic. I could go to Giant Eagle and get them developed and scan them for newsletters," she said. "They trained me, and I kept getting better and better."

Today, Ms. Hollerich rocks a "brand spanking new" Nikon Z9 — a professional-grade camera capable of 120 frames per second — that she taught herself to use. She carries her camera around every day, and is never at a loss for what to photograph, she said.

Airport CEO Christina Cassotis has kept Ms. Hollerich busy by expanding Pittsburgh International's roster of events since she began her tenure in 2015. Under Ms. Cassotis, Ms. Hollerich has covered "all the fun stuff," from the new terminal's groundbreaking in 2021 to action shots of PIT Paws, the airport's therapy dog program. She also covered the more mundane scenes around the terminal, like TSA lines and new signs and equipment being installed.

When the airport announces a new service, it's now presented through a multi-stage media rollout that includes a news conference and a "gate event" where the first plane arrives, Ms. Hollerich said.

She remembers the excitement of Icelandair debuting its nonstop seasonal flights from Pittsburgh to Reykjavik, Iceland, last May, as well as events celebrating smaller airlines such as Breeze Airways.

"Every time we get new air service, we're having a party, and I'm lucky that I get to cover them," she said.

Ms. Hollerich has fond memories of covering the construction of Presley's Place, a 1,500-square-foot sensory room in Gate A that opened in 2019.

The room features a simulated airplane cabin and private, soundproof spaces to allow customers to prepare for a flight, and is named after the son of airport heavy equipment operator Jason Rudge, who pitched the idea to Ms. Cassotis in a letter.

Ms. Hollerich said that the grand opening was "emotional," as Mr. Rudge, Presley, and the rest of his family stood alongside the airport workers who helped to build the room.

"An amazing day. Really, it was one of the highlights," Ms. Hollerich said.

'All the things we dreamed about'

When the current terminal held its ceremonial grand opening on Oct. 1, 1992, many of Pittsburgh International's employees had already started working there.

Mr. Parent, still in the finance department at the time, recalled that he and his co-workers had to pack up their offices in Moon and label the boxes so that they could be set up in the terminal while construction was still going on.

Larger items they couldn't transport themselves made the journey in moving vans, including an antique cast-iron safe that officials had to test to make sure it wasn't too heavy for the new terminal's floors.

"It was a major undertaking," Mr. Parent said. "We moved over and we were running around the airport and there was nobody here ... It was kind of exciting."

Now, Pittsburgh International's veteran employees are preparing for the long-awaited $1.7 billion new terminal, which has reached what executives deemed "substantial completion" and is going through final testing.

Mr. Parent and Mr. Kreeck will continue to work day-to-day out of the Field Maintenance Building, which will not change. They won't have to alter operations much for the new terminal, although Mr. Parent did highlight the terminal's several outdoor terraces that will be filled with native plants — a new feature that field maintenance will manage.

Speaking as a customer who occasionally flies out of the airport he maintains, Mr. Parent said he was impressed with the terminal's design — particularly the high ceilings and open floor plan.

"It does seem that there are a lot more open spaces to where you don't feel as confined or congested compared to other airports I've been to," Mr. Parent said.

Ms. Hollerich covered the terminal's groundbreaking four years ago and has attended every related event since, except one, when she was ill and missed the steel beams topping out.

"People are going to come in and they're just going to be dazzled," she said. "All the things we dreamed about have come to fruition."

First Published: October 18, 2025, 4:00 a.m.
Updated: October 18, 2025, 8:42 p.m.

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